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Testimony of Sarah Eagan, Child Advocate, State of Connecticut
Regarding Raised Bills 1006, 1007, 1008, and 6899

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Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban, distinguished members of the Children's Committee:

The Office of the Child Advocate appreciates the opportunity to offer this testimony regarding Senate Bills 1006, 1007, 1008, and House Bill 6899.

The mandate of the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) includes evaluating the delivery of state funded services to children and advocating for policies and practices that promote children's well-being and safety.

OCA supports SB 1006, AAC Voluntary Services within the Department of Children and Families (DCF) which seeks to clarify the responsibilities of the DCF and the Probate Court with regard to children and youth who are admitted to the DCF on a voluntary basis. Voluntary services are a critical resource for children and youth living with significant mental health challenges when their needs cannot be effectively met through services currently available to the parent or guardian. These services include home and community-based treatment as well as out-of-home treatment such as treatment foster care and residential treatment.

Voluntary services require partnership between the youth, parent, and DCF in developing a treatment plan that addresses the needs of the child/youth. The focus must be on best interests of the child/youth as well as the need for permanency planning for children and youth whose specialized needs require out-of-home treatment. These children often have very complex needs, and OCA is frequently contacted because of the lack of agreement between the parent/youth/involved providers and DCF on how and where to best address the complex needs. SB 1006 describes the responsibility and authority of the Probate Court to periodically review the plan and ensure that the plan is consistent with the identified needs and best interests of the child. It emphasizes the need to address permanency for children receiving voluntary services. The Probate Court may also conduct a hearing on its own motion to review the plan for a child who is not in an out-of-home treatment setting if the court determines that imminent concerns regarding the health and safety of the child or youth exist. The bill also provides an option for the parent or youth who is aggrieved by decisions of the Department to terminate admission for voluntary services to request a hearing before the Probate Court who may order the continuation of services and specify a time for determination of a new case service or permanency plan.

The OCA would like to bring to your attention our concern that under a 2005 Memorandum of Agreement between the DCF and the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), children over the age of 8 eligible for DDS due to intellectual disability with co-occurring mental health

challenges would be served through a voluntary services program administered through DDS. That program currently serves approximately 500 children. OCA believes that the DDS is better positioned to understand and provide critically needed therapeutic supports and services to these children because of their expertise and understanding the implications of developmental challenges. These children, many of whom have extraordinarily complex mental health or behavioral challenges are currently without the benefit of similar safeguards as described in SB 1006.

OCA strongly supports the goals of Senate Bill 1007, AAC Permanency Placements to improve outcomes for youth in foster care. This bill is important as it seeks to increase opportunities for youth in foster care to have a voice and be empowered regarding the plans for their family and their future. It also allows more children who may be separated from their siblings as a result of being in foster care to maintain contact after adoption.

Many older youth who have been abused or neglected and who live in state custody do not live in families and may not even have a case plan recommending a family placement. Sometimes this is because a youth does not want to be in a foster family or does not want to be adopted for their own personal reasons. Other times, and too often, it is because we have not found a family, or more specifically, the right family, for the child to live with. At the OCA we have heard from many youth over the years who tell us that they want to be in a family; they want the forever connection to a family unit. This absolute need to be part of a family is universal, and one of the most critical elements of human social structure.

Today DCF is working towards the important goal of ensuring that children are placed in families whenever possible, implementing new case planning techniques to help older youth find homes. But much work remains to be done to ensure family relationships and other stable connections for many of our older youth, hundreds of whom still do not have permanent or stable, supportive family connections.

SB 1007 highlights the need to include youth in the case planning process, ensuring that their voices are heard and that case planning meetings are held at times when youth and their caregivers can attend. These simple measures may be critical for a youth who needs to know that adults are listening to him or her and understanding what their needs.

SB 1007 also emphasizes the need for all youth to have stable, supportive connections with a caring adult, even if they don't live with that person. Our youth in DCF care need the same things that all children need: love, guidance, discipline, and acceptance from at least one adult who doesn't leave them. The Bill requires that, wherever possible, every permanency plan include reference to who the caring adult will be for each child.

Sibling Connections

For many children who have been abused or neglected, the connection that means the most to them is their brother or sister. Many children in foster care are placed with their siblings, and DCF makes a concerted effort to keep siblings together whenever possible. However, not all brothers and sisters are able to stay together, and these separations can cause significant pain, loss and anxiety. Sibling connections are important for all children but can be critical for children who have already experienced the pain and trauma of separation from their family due to abuse or neglect. Child welfare best practice seeks to ensure that prospective foster and adoptive parents understand the

importance of sibling connections and encourages commitment to permanent relationships whenever appropriate. SB 1007 permits a court to facilitate ongoing sibling visitation after a child's adoption from foster care, so long as the views of the adoptive parent have been heard and considered, and so long as visitation or ongoing contact is in the child's best interests.

OCA staff have frequently heard from or about children and youth in foster care who are separated from their brother or sister. A child asks "do you know how my brother is?" or shares "I got to see my sister last week and go to her birthday party." Encountering the importance of these relationships for these children is heartbreaking, as sometimes the sibling relationship is their only sense of family connection. Losing that connection for children is often unimaginably painful.

OCA wholeheartedly appreciates the raising of Senate Bill 1008, An Act Creating an Infant Toddler Services Board which seeks to help strengthen families and improve outcomes for our most vulnerable citizens: infants and toddlers.

A critical and exciting opportunity exists for the state to innovate and strengthen its wellness system for infants, toddlers and their families. Our current system of services and supports for our youngest and most vulnerable children consists of a great number of moving parts and this is an excellent opportunity to bring them together in a meaningful way. SB 1008 can assist with development of infrastructure to support strategic planning and investment in CT's infants and toddlers, as well as ensure interagency accountability, collaboration, and coordination of services.

Finally, OCA supports House Bill 6899, An Act Expanding Guardianship Opportunities for Children and Implementing Provisions of the Federal Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act providing that children and youth in DCF care have the opportunity to engage in age-appropriate outings and activities such as sleep-overs and trips to the mall.

Children in foster care or group care may have more difficulty participating in such every-day activities, in part due to confusion over whether the foster parent or the social worker or group home provider is able to make developmentally-appropriate rules for the child. Sometimes this confusion can even prevent children from going to a friend's house to play or "hang out" because caregivers are rightfully concerned about following licensing rules and protocols. This Bill clarifies that licensed caregivers and providers should use the "reasonable and prudent parent" standard that they would use with their own child to allow the children in their care to have access to the every-day activities that all children need to thrive and feel happy and normal.

HB 6899 also extends the opportunity for subsidized guardianship to "fictive kin," defined in the bill as an adult who is "unrelated to a child" but who has an "emotionally significant relationship with such child amounting to a familial relationship." OCA supports this change as it increases the opportunity for permanency for the state's abused and neglected youth.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

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